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According to data that emerged as a byproduct of a total study designed to measure the impact of higher education on the student, students are likely to find greater understanding from their parents on many current issues than from fellow students at another college. Student and parent opinions, as perceived by students, were collected from 3 colleges: (1) a highly selective institution drawing students mainly from the upper socioeconomic levels. Parents were liberal in their political-social outlook and belonged mainly to the Democratic Party. (2) an institution in which students, parental occupations and incomes were typically middle class. Parents were mostly Republicans and Protestants. (3) a public institution drawing students from a metropolitan area. Few parents were college educated: most were bluecollar workers, Democrats and Catholic. On issues such as: Supreme Court decisions on civil rights, the Vietnam war, aid to minority groups, general welfare programs, the House Un-American Activities Committee, the use of cigarettes, alcohol, LSD and Marijuana, artistic, financial and intellectual interest humanitarian ideals, politics, religion, recreation and vocational pursuits, students faithfully reflected the attitudes of their parents. While many parents may not understand other people's children, there is little support for the popular notion of a generation gap. The evidence strongly suggests that the attitude and interest gaps shown are less related to age than to the strata of American society. (JS)

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IS THERE A GENERATION GAP?

Is there a generation gap? Are the interests and concerns of people under 30 so different from those of people over 30 that they have difficulty communicating? Are college students rebelling against parental values? According to some data collected this fall in one of the Center's long-term research projects, the answers all seem to be no. As a matter of fact, students are likely to find greater understanding from their parents on many current issues than from fellow students at some other colleges.

Ten member colleges of the Union for Research and Experimentation in Higher Education who are participating in a collaborative study with the Center have been receiving reports describing the characteristics of their entering freshman students. The research, under the direction of Mildred Henry and Paul Heist of the Center staff, revealed some interesting data as a byproduct of the total study, which was designed to answer some basic questions about the impact of higher education on the student. As a part of the first phase of the study, students were asked to give their own opinions, as well as those of their parents, on a variety of issues of national concern. The figures in Table I present student and parent opinions, as perceived by students, for three colleges in the Union which differ greatly from one another.

College A is a highly selective college drawing students primarily from the upper socioeconomic levels. The majority of the parents of students at this college are well educated (65% of the fathers and 50% of the mothers are college graduates), the fathers are employed in high-level professional and managerial positions, and more than one-half of the students report the family income as above $10,000. Parents are reported to adhere primarily to the Democratic party, to possess relatively strong cultural and intellectual interests, and to be liberal in their political-social orientation. On a religious dimension, the largest group of College A families is agnostic, atheist, or without formal religious affiliation (37%).

Students at College B represent a more typical middle class background. Fewer than one-half of the parents (43% of the fathers and 27% of the mothers) are college educated, and parental occupations and incomes are typically middle class. Republicans outnumber Democrats two to one. The religious orientation is primarily Protestant (57%).

College C is a public institution which draws its students primarily from a metropolitan area. Very few of the parents have bachelor's degrees (8% of the fathers and 7% of the mothers), and occupations and incomes are at the lower levels. Almost one-half of the fathers have blue-collar jobs, and they are twice as likely to vote for Democrats as Republicans. The predominant religious orientation is Catholic (60%).

Obviously, the differences in the backgrounds of entering students at the three colleges are considerable.

Most striking about the data presented in Table I is the similarity between student opinions and those of parents—as the students report them. Where student groups depart noticeably from parental opinions, they appear to be more liberal than they perceive their parents to be. Nevertheless, the greatest differences are not between students and parents, but between the student groups at Colleges A, B, and C.

The question regarding the Supreme Court decisions upholding civil rights presents a vivid example of the locus of the opinion gap. Although all of the student groups have moved from the perceived parental position toward the more liberal position of support for the Supreme Court decisions, students are still closer to their own family attitudes on the issue than they are to students in the other colleges. The data of Table I deny the existence of a true generation gap on social-political affairs; the students simply do not see their parents as holding opinions vastly different from their own.

TABLE I

Student reports of their own and parental opinions (in percentages)*

	College	*Self*	*Father*	*Mother*
In favor of Supreme Court decisions upholding civil rights	A	86	71	75
	B	50	34	37
	C	34	20	23
Against expansion of the war in Vietnam	A	52	33	43
	B	11	10	15
	C	17	20	24
In favor of financial aid for underprivileged minority groups	A	60	46	51
	B	30	21	24
	C	24	15	17
In favor of general welfare programs such as Social Security and welfare	A	62	61	63
	B	31	28	30
	C	53	50	52
Against House Un-American Activities Committee	A	49	34	35
	B	9	6	5
	C	6	4	4

* Alternatives for each item were: In favor, in favor with reservations, neutral, against with reservations, and against.

One might speculate that questions regarding some of the "new morality" issues might reveal a wider generation gap than political-social affairs. Since the purpose of the research project was not directed primarily to these considerations, students were not asked to report parental attitudes on such questions. They were asked, however, to indicate on a five-

point scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) their own attitudes about the use of cigarettes, alcohol, LSD, and marijuana. The results are reported in Table II.

TABLE II

Percentage of students marking "agree" or "strongly agree" in answer to the question: A person who is mature enough to go to college should have the freedom to make personal decisions about the use of the following: cigarettes, alcohol, LSD, and marijuana.

	College	*Percentage (agreeing or strongly agreeing)*
Cigarettes	A	98
	B	90
	C	90
Alcohol	A	92
	B	79
	C	58
LSD	A	47
	B	26
	C	14
Marijuana	A	65
	B	28
	C	14

Here again, with the exception of cigarettes, remarkable differences in attitude are found between students on the three campuses. It is hard to conceive of a much greater gap between parents and students than that shown between *student* groups at colleges A, B, and C on the issue of marijuana.

Still looking for the "generation gap" then, let us turn to the broad interests of students and their parents. Table III shows the percentages of students rating each activity as "important" (as opposed to "somewhat important" or "not important") for themselves and for their parents. Here we find the nearest thing to a generation gap that appears to exist.

Despite the dramatic endorsements of the importance of artistic, humanitarian, and intellectual interests by College A students, the "generation gaps" shown for colleges A and B are, for the most part, still less than the difference between the student groups. College C students, however—frequently the first in their family to attend college—perceive a distinct gap between their interests and those of their parents. The interests of these students, in every instance except religion, are more like those of the predominantly middle class students at College B than they are like their own lower class parents.

It has been said that college instills middle class values, and the data from Colleges B and C offer some support for the statement. College A students, however, show a tendency to move away from so-called middle class interests in an exaggeration of the differences already existing between their parents and others in American society.

While comparisons of student and parental *group* percentages do not necessarily imply similarity between *individual* students and parents, a close look at these and other data at the Center shows that students reflect the attitudes of their parents rather faithfully. But perhaps the best way to find out whether the younger generation feels a lack of understanding from those over 30 is to ask the students directly. Researchers Henry and Heist did so by requesting students to express the extent of their agreement with the statement that, "Generally, it is hard for a person over 30 to *really* understand the young person today." Students at all three colleges rejected the statement emphatically; at College A, only 14% checked either "agree" or "agree strongly." The rates of agreement for Colleges B and C were 29% and 32% respectively. It is of some interest to observe that the student group at College A, with more "far out" liberal opinions, feels more optimistic about the possibility of being understood by adults than do the student groups expressing more conservative viewpoints.

TABLE III

Percentage of students rating interests as "important" for self and for parents.

	College	*Self*	*Father*	*Mother*
Artistic, cultural interests	A	70	32	45
	B	33	27	35
	C	37	12	21
Financial interests	A	25	57	40
	B	50	75	68
	C	59	81	80
Humanitarian ideals	A	77	50	63
	B	43	36	43
	C	53	36	40
Intellectual interests	A	87	52	48
	B	48	46	42
	C	64	38	36
Politics	A	38	46	31
	B	22	42	23
	C	24	44	26
Recreation, hobbies	A	44	27	19
	B	61	38	32
	C	61	29	24
Religion	A	26	26	38
	B	38	40	53
	C	67	50	67
Vocational pursuits	A	51	68	41
	B	64	60	48
	C	82	58	53

While it may well be true that parents don't understand other people's children (certainly College C parents might have some difficulty with College A students), these data do not offer much support for the popular notion of a generation gap. The evidence strongly suggests that the attitude and interest gaps shown here are less related to chronological age than to the strata of American society.

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